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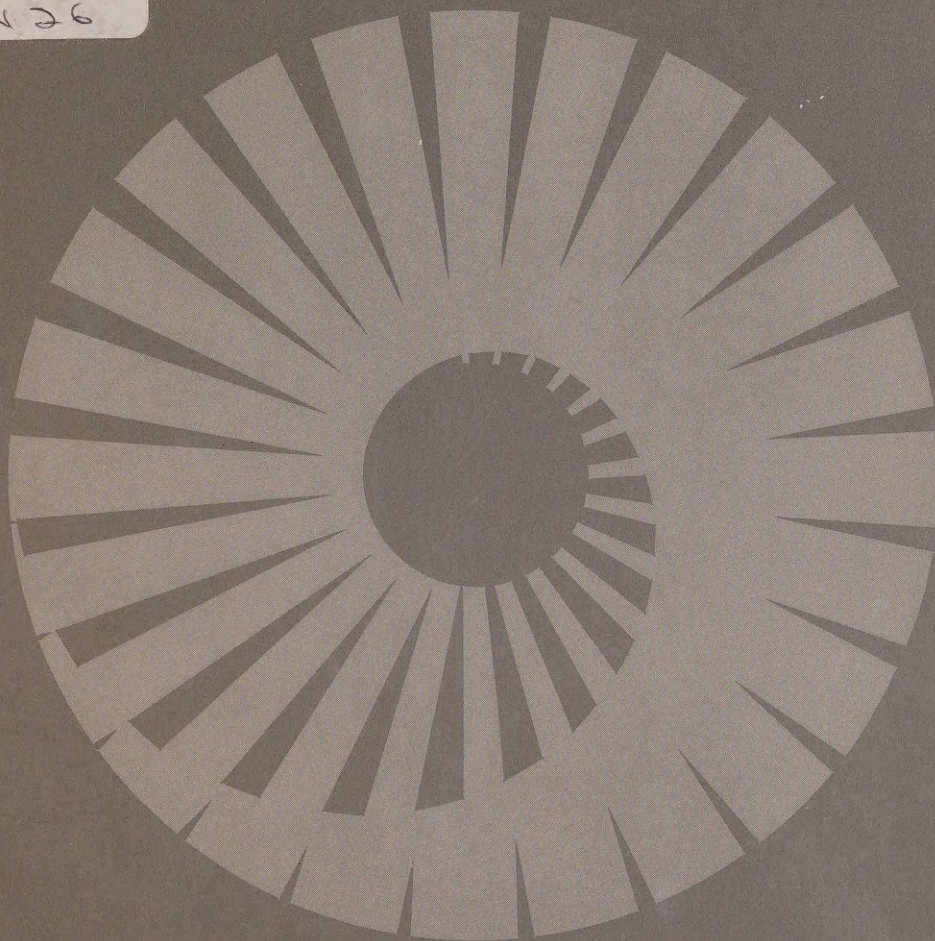
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Notes on QWL

by

Hans van Beinum*

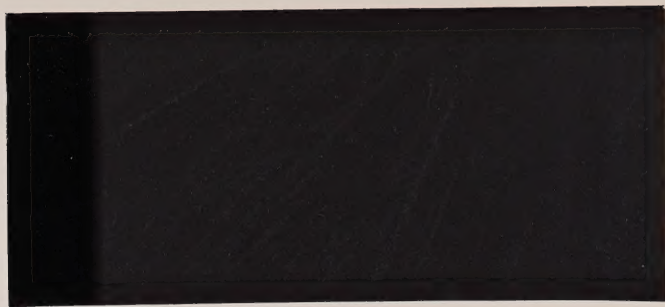
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Notes on QWL

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1. The Meaning of Quality of Working Life

QWL refers to the quality of the relationship between workers and their work environment. In particular, it is concerned with the democratization of work, that is, increasing the involvement of workers in the decision-making process affecting their jobs and work environments.

Behind this simple statement lies an explicit and comprehensive set of values, principles and notions concerning the design of organizations. QWL is an expression of the development of a new form of work organization based on design principles so fundamentally different from the traditional form of work organization that we can speak of a new organizational paradigm.

The essence of this new paradigm lies in its design principles. Any work organization has a choice of two alternatives for organizing people to develop and maintain adequate organizational flexibility and variety, the necessary pre-conditions for effective adaptation to changing circumstances. The choice is with regard to the way an organization designs redundancy into its system. Unless an organization has a certain amount of over-capacity, or redundancy, it has not got the flexibility, it cannot generate the variety, and it does not have the ability to self-organize, which are all necessary to enable it to adapt to its environment. In other words, organizations need redundancy in order to survive.

The choice is between redundancy of parts or redundancy of functions. In the first option, people have narrowly specialized individual tasks, and are being used as uni-functional components, as replaceable parts of a machine. The basic building block is formed by the one person - one task structure. Under this design principle, special parts have to be added to the system for the purpose of control, and to back up or replace parts whenever they fail. It creates a typical bureaucracy, that is, a rigid, highly stratified, multi-level, and

hierarchical system. It reveals a mechanistic view of the organization. The second option, redundancy of functions, recognizes the multiple capabilities of people and gives people more complex roles. Instead of spare parts being added to the system, additional functions are developed in each of the operating parts (i.e. people). Each person is thus able to perform a range of functions. People have the opportunity to be actively involved in the affairs of the workplace and to develop their ability to handle a wide range of responsibilities. Developing workers' capacity to handle a wide range of roles and responsibilities increases variety for both the organization and the individual workers, and creates the conditions for self-regulation. The building block in this type of organization is not the one-person one-task structure, but the self-managing group. The second option reveals a view of the organization which is both organic and contextual. QWL is based on the organizational design principle of redundancy of functions, which integrates the democratization of work and the economic performance of the organization.

This new paradigm of organization can be described from different points of appreciation:

* Human Dignity. The notion that people are a valuable societal resource to be developed and not a commodity or an extension of the technology. The recognition that people bring with them to the workplace multiple capabilities and basic social and psychological needs pertaining to work. And that it is therefore a matter of job and organizational design whether the human resources of the organization are used and developed in a positive or in a negative fashion.

* Organizational effectiveness. Organizations are open systems, that is, they are in a continuous interaction with their environments. Organizational performance and indeed survival depend on the way organizations are able to manage the interdependencies with their environments. Our world is becoming increasingly complex, unpredictable and turbulent; consequently the demands made on organizations for positive and active adaptation, for flexibility, a

capacity for learning, and the ability to manage continuous change, have become very high indeed and are essential for organizational performance. However, the capacity for organizational flexibility, adaptation, and learning resides in the human resources of the organization. Therefore, the principles and practices of job and organizational design will determine whether this organizational capacity can be mobilized and sustained, and consequently whether organizational efficiency and effectiveness will be achieved.

* Societal stability. The unpredictability and thus the turbulence in our environment is to a large extent a function of the "rate of change" of the rate of change, in combination with the complex and deepening interdependencies between the various sectors in society, the economic, social, technological and political. Today's society has a built-in propensity for instability; turbulence has become a system characteristic. Bureaucratic and rigid infrastructures will increase this tendency and will re-inforce the destabilizing conditions in our environment. To the extent that the various systems making up the infrastructure of our society are able to develop their ability to respond in a flexible and positive adaptive manner, the turbulence in society will be reduced. This requires the development of structures which will encourage people to take personal responsibility, and which provide opportunities for people to be part of self-managing social systems and thus be directly involved in issues of their immediate environment.

From society's point of view, the democratization of work is both an expression and an extension of the values and principles of democracy. It provides people with the opportunity to learn to deal with individual development and responsibility in the context of collaboration with others and commitment to the objectives of a larger system. In this respect it would not be inappropriate to understand QWL as a process of learning in citizenship.

The origin of this development goes back to the work of Kurt Lewin in the 30's and 40's and that of the Tavistock Institute in London during the 50's and 60's.

It was only in the 1950's that it was slowly being recognized that socio-psychological factors are in-built characteristics of work systems rather than additional features to do with "human relations", and that organizations consist of social, technological and economic dimensions, all of which are interdependent, but all of which also have independent values and characteristics of their own. The social (the people) and the technological (the things) form the substantive dimensions, whilst the economic dimension expresses and measures the effectiveness with which the human and technological resources are used to carry out the primary task of the organization.

The organization has thus not only the properties of an open system, but also those of a socio-technical system. The concept of the socio-technical system arose from the consideration that any production system requires both a technological organization (equipment and process lay-out) and a social system, relating to each other those who carry out the necessary tasks. The nature of the inter-relationship between these two systems is crucial for the effectiveness of the organization. The social and technical systems are interdependent and basically complementary. By designing and managing the work situation in such a way that the social system and the technical system are interrelated in the highest possible complementary way, one achieves a joint optimization of the social and technical systems, and thereby an optimization of the functioning of the organization as a whole.

This means that, unless technical systems are translated into tasks in a way which is in accordance with human needs and characteristics, we will create organizations which will function far below their potential level of effectiveness. The question is therefore: in a specific work organization what are the critical requirements of the technology and what are the characteristics of the human system? Matching people and technology, that is, the joint optimization of the socio-technical system, expresses the design principle of redundancy of functions.

Of particular relevance for the area of job and organizational design are those requirements men and women have of their work which are in addition to those which are usually specified in a contract of employment (i.e. other than wages, hours, safety, security of tenure, etc.). These basic social and psychological needs pertaining to work, which are recognized as principles of job design, include:

1. adequate elbow room.
2. chances of learning.
3. an optimal level of variety.
4. conditions where workers can and do get help and respect from their fellow workers.
5. a sense of the meaningfulness of one's work.
6. a desirable future.

The basic building block of organizations designed according to the principles of joint optimization of the socio-technical system is, as we mentioned earlier, the semi-autonomous or self-managing group, which consists of a number of people who collectively have the responsibility and the skill to manage a set of interdependent tasks which together form a natural whole. This is in contrast to the one person-one task structure which characterizes the traditional fragmented and fragmenting scientific management organization.

In the 1960's and 70's these new conceptual and methodological orientations concerning the world of work organization, as developed initially in the 1950s by the Tavistock Institute in England, continued in different countries in Europe, particularly in Norway, Sweden and Holland. Parallel developments took place in the U.S., Australia and other parts of the world. At present, there is hardly a country in the industrialized world in which there is not a government supported program, or agency, or some kind of institute, engaged either in research, consulting or diffusion concerning new forms of work organization.

Although at a first glance the number of developments in this field in different parts of the world is quite impressive, the overall diffusion of a more comprehensive approach is however still slow. This is a rather

interesting and curious phenomenon. The fact is that the conceptual and theoretical basis of the QWL organization is far superior to the traditional scientific management model. From a practical point of view the empirical evidence shows very clearly that productivity and organizational effectiveness are significantly increased by these new forms of work organization. And last but not least the values of the new organizational design are fully consonant with the basic values of our democratic society. As a matter of fact, QWL is the organizational expression of these values. One would expect, therefore, that in view of the critical economic situation, the demands which are being made by high technology, and the "logic" of QWL, there would be an explosion of QWL-based activities. There is a steady increase, no doubt, but the tempo of development is not in accordance with the economic urgency of today's world.

We are clearly in the midst of dealing with a vast and complex process of change, not merely organizational, but one that suffuses the whole society. It is a process which has the properties of a cultural figure-ground reversal. Compared with the traditional scientific management approach, which is still very common in both the private and the public sector, QWL is a radical perspective. It has the characteristics of a new organizational paradigm, and as we know from other spheres, shifts in paradigms are not just intellectual dilemmas or complex educational challenges. They constitute psycho-cultural transitions of a kind which we have not yet properly understood. It is obvious that the role of management and also of the trade union will change as a result of the new forms of work organization based on the new design principles. To manage a system which is characterized by self management, organizational learning, and proactive adaptation, requires management structures, processes and skills which are significantly different from those needed to manage the traditional bureaucratic organization with its exclusive hierarchical controls. Similarly, the trade unions will be profoundly affected in their various functions and with regard to their relationships with management and workers.

As the new organizational paradigm develops further and becomes more common in corporate as well as trade union thinking and practice, an increasingly important role will be played by conditions and forces in the external environment which will affect the diffusion of the new paradigm on the organizational level.

2. Developments in the QWL field

The various developments in the QWL field during the last ten years in North America have been quite significant. Although the process has been much slower and less spectacular in Canada, the nature and direction of the developments and the classes of problems being encountered in the U.S. and Canada are not dissimilar.

QWL-related activities (widely defined) in North America must now be counted in their thousands and there is a continuous and persistent search by industry for new and more effective forms of work organization. Today, there is more experience, more competence and, what is very important, there is more confidence in the ability within the work place to deal with the QWL process. At the same time, however, the number of "true" QWL approaches in this larger scene is limited (although growing), and we must recognize that there is still considerable resistance to the democratization of work.

Ten years ago the emphasis was on initiating projects, and many approaches were undertaken as pilot projects, or were viewed as experiments. Today, QWL is considered not just as a desirable and necessary part in the development of an organization but as the basis for organizational design and performance. Therefore, in addition to initiating QWL, we are at present also very much concerned with sustaining and diffusing QWL. Consequently management and unions are faced with different and more complex problems. Gradually people are beginning to understand and deal with QWL in the context of the total organization. Nevertheless, there is still a high percentage of projects initiated which cannot be sustained because neither management nor unions are able or willing to deal with QWL in terms of "total system" change.

Ten years ago the question was: what is QWL and why is it important? That phase was followed by a period where the focus was on methodological questions: how does one do it? Today we know how to design effective work organizations which are fully congruent with the basic values of democratic society. The question we are now faced with, however, is primarily one of political will and moral courage: do we dare do it? The experiences in Europe and North America have shown consistently that the development and diffusion of QWL cannot take place without leadership. It is obvious that management, unions, and government have a crucial role to play in this respect, and it is not sufficient for them just to approve, support or endorse QWL. We are dealing with a process of cultural change which requires the active commitment of all stake holders.

Furthermore, there is an increase in new kinds of questions and problems pertaining to job design and work organizations, generated by developments in such fields as new technology, health and safety, and employment equity. They constitute a new generation of issues for which consulting services are not readily available.

Before we elaborate this point any further, it is important to draw attention to two phenomena which can negatively affect the further development and diffusion of QWL, and are, paradoxically, based on the power of the new organizational paradigm. In a manner of speaking they form its Achilles heel.

First of all QWL is ubiquitous. It is concerned with the basic principles underlying the design of organizations, and as the phenomenon of organization pervades all spheres of society, the meaning of QWL goes beyond the work place.

Consequently, in view of the social ecological properties of QWL, the development and diffusion of QWL generates questions of great complexity. Particularly at the present time with its high level of social, economic and political interdependencies, QWL inevitably triggers powerful reactions and forces of a psychological, cultural and political kind.

Second, QWL creates transparency; it makes things visible. While all processes of change have certain unveiling characteristics, in the case of QWL, this tendency takes on a more radical and profound meaning. QWL raises such questions as the nature of the values and principles underlying the way we design and manage human systems. It brings into focus the quality of the relationship between people and their tasks, amongst workers, between management and workers, between union and management, between the organization and its environment.

A process of social change which correlates with transparency and ubiquity is a powerful one, and can easily generate its own backlash, at least temporarily, particularly if the focus of the change would not readily accommodate important new developments in society. Therefore any QWL thrust should be regularly reviewed keeping in mind this Achilles heel.

We mentioned earlier that the quality of leadership is a very critical condition for the further development of QWL. However, it is also becoming apparent that it is not a sufficient condition. Other factors are emerging which play an important role as well.

In addition to the intra-organizational properties of the QWL process and the crucial role of leadership, we are also increasingly encountering questions which have significance in a larger context. By that we mean processes in the wider environment which impinge on QWL, and which, at the same time, are themselves being influenced by QWL. These phenomena, which manifest themselves on the meso and macro levels, can be called QWL domains. They represent issues which are too many-sided and too much a part of the public concern to be addressed by any single organization. They denote new units of analysis and action which constitute a domain of common concern for a number of organizations. Hence, they require an inter-organizational approach.

These emerging QWL domains are formed by the interdependence between the values, principles and notions of the new form of work

organization and such fields as industrial relations, high technology, the educational system, health and safety, the women's movement and employment equity, and community development. They constitute the next generation of issues in the development of QWL.



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